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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR IN SIAULIAI STRESSES DEVELOPMENT AND TOLERANCE, TOURS NATO DETACHMENT

REF: A. VILNIUS 1331

[B](#). VILNIUS 079

[1](#)1. SUMMARY. Ambassador traveled to Lithuania's northern city of Siauliai October 20-21 to conveying a message of admiration for Lithuania's rapid democratic and economic growth and appreciation for its activist foreign policy and contributions to the NATO alliance. In a town often identified with anti-Semitism, the Ambassador promoted a message of tolerance and the rights of persons during meetings, press interviews, and a public forum with local governmental and NGO leaders. He also visited the Zokniai airfield, home to NATO's Baltic air policing assets, and received briefings from the Commander of Lithuania's Air Force and NATO's detachment commander on the air-policing mission. End Summary.

Background

[1](#)2. The visit to Siauliai was the second in a series of planned Ambassadorial trips (reftel A) to regional towns in Lithuania. Siauliai is Lithuania's fourth largest city and the economic, cultural, and educational center of Northern Lithuania. The city is most famous for the memorial of thousands of crosses planted in a hillside, initially dedicated to people who were killed for Lithuanian freedom, which draws nearly a million visitors per annum. After WWII left Siauliai in near ruins, the Soviet Union rebuilt and developed Siauliai to support the largest military airport in Eastern Europe. The Zokniai airport is currently home to a Lithuanian air force base and, since March, has hosted NATO's Baltic air policing assets.

The Ambassador's Message

[1](#)3. The Ambassador stressed five themes with local governmental, NGO, cultural and educational leaders during a two-day tour d'horizon on October 20-21:

--ACTIVIST FOREIGN POLICY: Ambassador Mull noted Lithuania's activist foreign policy, its role in strengthening the transatlantic alliance and its constructive role in regional stability.

--CONTINUED STRONG BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP: The Ambassador assured interlocutors that Lithuania's close relationship with the United States will continue.

--DEMOCRATIC AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: Ambassador Mull praised Lithuania's success in progressing from a totalitarian system to a democracy that is vibrant, free, and secure.

--INCREASED ECONOMIC COOPERATION: The Ambassador promoted greater economic cooperation between the United States and Lithuania and highlighted December's Baltic Trade and Investment Mission in London.

--TOLERANCE: The Ambassador praised those who, recognizing a serious threat to democracy, stand up and condemn intolerance in all its forms, including anti-Semitism.

A Provincial Town In Development

[1](#)4. Interlocutors focused discussions on issues related to economic development and attracting foreign investment. Though Siauliai has Northern Lithuania's largest university, hospital, and airport, interlocutors noted that Siauliai is best described as a provincial town, one hungry for development and investment.

[1](#)5. Siauliai County Governor Arvydas Sedzius, who also serves as Chairman of Siauliai's Regional Development Council, said that Siauliai has not yet benefited significantly from EU structural fund support. These funds, and foreign direct investment, said Siauliai Mayor Vytautas Juskus, have gone primarily to Lithuania's three largest cities, Vilnius,

Kaunas and Klaipeda, and have only begun to trickle to Siauliai for local development projects. Ramunas Markauskas, Administrator of Siauliai's 68-member strong Confederation of NGOs, told the Ambassador that the region's budget for social welfare programs, for example, is only 130,000 Litass (approximately \$46,000 USD), insufficient to meet the needs of a population of 150,000. Leadership at the Siauliai Hospital and Siauliai University told the Ambassador that lack of government assistance keeps these institutions on shoestring budgets and impedes expansion or improvement of services.

16. Siauliai airport Director Jonas Jutkelis noted his frustration at attracting private investment capital to one of Eastern Europe's best-equipped civilian airports. In spite of its very long runway, new control tower, highly qualified specialists, close proximity to the Latvian border, and first-rank certification, the airport has not attracted private capital for infrastructure development. The airport continues to seek investment partners, but Jutkelis said he was not optimistic about finding one in the near future.

----- Rebellious Past, Undercurrent of Intolerance Today -----

17. Siauliai, a center of rebellion against both Tsarist Russian and Soviet oppression during its nearly 800-year history, is still known for its straightforward, outspoken people. Acts of intolerance are occasionally reported (reftel B) against Siauliai's small Jewish community, though governmental and NGO leaders downplayed these sporadic occurrences, and highlighted Siauliai's inter-ethnic harmony to the Ambassador. Reflecting Siauliai's reputation for candor, residents asked the Ambassador challenging, hard-hitting questions on topics that ranged from USG support for Lithuania following the Potsdam Conference to the lack of U.S. investment in the region during an open forum at the Siauliai Community House. A leader of Lithuania's National Democratic party present at the forum questioned the U.S. role in the Middle East.

----- NATO's Footprint -----

18. Lithuanian Air Force Commander Colonel Jonas Marcinkus and NATO's Detachment Commander British Wing Commander Dan Storrs provided briefings on the ongoing renovations of the Zokniai airfield and the NATO air-policing mission. Marcinkus said that renovations to the Zokniai airfield are on schedule and should be complete by 2006. Storrs spoke highly of the logistical support provided by the GOL has provided to his detachment since its arrival October 14. Storrs, during a comprehensive tour of his operational headquarters, also detailed his efforts to keep NATO's footprint as small as possible in Siauliai, in order to maintain amicable relations with the civilian population.

----- Media Coverage -----

19. There was extensive media coverage throughout the visit. The Ambassador gave an exclusive interview to the region's largest daily newspaper and provided interviews for the region's television and print outlets throughout the visit.

----- Comment: Hope for the Future -----

10. Siauliai lags behind Vilnius, Kaunas, and Klaipeda in terms of development and investment. With low unemployment, a well-educated work force, the region's largest university, and NATO funds helping renovate the airport and contributing to the local economy, the future for Siauliai could be bright. The region's Achilles' Heel is the undercurrent of intolerance, particularly anti-Semitism. For the region to achieve its potential, its leaders must play a more active role in promoting tolerance.

MULL